

Vna lex et fides, ritus uarius. A Gloss by Nicholas of Cusa to the *Doctrina Mahumeti*

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Abstract

Nicholas of Cusa gave a great deal of thought to the problem of reconciling the belief in a single religion for all mankind and the incontrovertible fact of the varied forms that the worship of God can take. His work *De pace fidei* in particular is devoted to this topic, and it appears as well in the *Cribratio Alkorani* and in his glosses to the two copies of the *Alkoranus Latinus* that he had at his disposal when he was writing these works: Kues 108 and Vat. lat. 4071, which he annotated in 1453 and 1462, respectively.

1. Introduction

When reading the work *De pace fidei* and other writings by Nicholas of Cusa, we become aware of the attention that the author gave to thinking about how varied mankind is in the practice of religion and to unraveling the relationship between Christianity and other religions. In his texts we find direct references to this preoccupation, especially in the *De pace fidei*, the *Cribratio Alkorani*,² and the glosses he made in the two copies of the *Alkoranus Latinus* that he had at his disposal while composing these works.

This is not intended to be an exhaustive study of this key idea in Nicholas of Cusa, about which much has already been written. My intention here is to bring a comment by Cusa himself to bear on this complex topic. The comment is his brief autograph gloss “*Vna lex et fides, ritus uarius*,” recently found in Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 4071, on folio 17r, and dated 1462. It belongs to the corpus of glosses he wrote during his second reading and annotating of the *Alkoranus Latinus*, in preparation for writing the *Cribratio Alkorani*. These glosses are different from the ones he made in Bernkastel-Kues, St. Nikolaus-Hospital Bibliothek, MS 108 in preparation for writing his *De pace fidei* in September 1453, in response to the fall of Constantinople to the Turks on May 29, 1453. In

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2. For a new perspective on the purpose of both works, see Monfasani, John (2018), «Cusanus, the Greeks and Islam», in *Nicholas of Cusa and Times of Transition: Essays in Honor of Gerald Christianson*, edited by Thomas M. Izbicki, Jason Aleksander, and Donald Duclow. Leiden-Boston, pp. 96–112 (96–97).

this marginal note, Cardinal Cusanus underscores the applicability of this concept—which he had referred to directly in the contents of *De pace fidei*—to all religions, and especially to Islam.

In effect, in *De pace fidei*, Nicholas of Cusa repeatedly analyzes and develops the formula that presents this idea: the relationship between God, a single God, and a single religion, with the one God as its object, and the different ways for this single religion to manifest itself, ways that are shaped by different rites. Where does this short and simple formulation come from that Nicholas of Cusa applies so successfully this dilemma?

In the annotations that L. Hagemann makes to the text “*Quae concludunt, quod, si varietas legum vel rituum in identitate fidei in variis gentibus per dei nuntios precepta reperiatur, hoc quidem oboedienti nequaquam, quominus apud piissimum atque iustissimum iudicem condignum praemium assequatur, obesse poterit*” (I II 27 9-12), in his edition of the *Cribratio Alkorani*,³ he points to the *Doctrina Mahumeti* as the source of the clear and precise formulation used by Nicholas of Cusa, writing “*dubium non potest esse, quin Doctrina fons et origo illius sententiae sit*”⁴.

“*Doctrina*” is understood to mean the minor work *Doctrina Mahumeti*, a doctrinal exposition of Islam that takes the form of a catechism in which Muḥammad is questioned by the Jew Abdia iben Salon about himself and the teachings of the new Islamic religion.

This is how it presents the dialogue about Muḥammad’s preaching:

Dic ergo, legem tuam praedicas, an legem Dei? Respondit, legem Dei. Et ille: quid est lex Dei? Respondit, Fides. Quae fides? Ait, Non dii, sed Deus ipse unus, sine partecipe. Ego Machumet seruus et nuncius eius, praedicans finem, quo sine dubio mortui resurgent. Ait, Verum est quod dicis. Dic itaque si placet, quot sunt leges Dei? Respondit, una. Quid ergo dices de prophetis, qui te praecesserunt? Respondit: Lex quidem, siue fides, omnium una, sed ritus diuersorum nimirum diuersi. Ait: Ita est, ut dicis.⁵

Nicholas of Cusa read this passage in the *Doctrina Mahumeti*, one of the works in the *Corpus Islamlatinum*, which together with the Qur’ān were first translated into Latin by Robert of Ketton and Herman of Carinthia in Hispania in 1143, through the initiative of Peter the Venerable. In the margins of both manuscripts of

3. Nicolaus Cusanus (1970), *Opera Omnia* iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita VII. *De pace fidei. Cum epistula ad Iohannem de Segobia*. Ediderunt commentariisque illustraverunt Raymundus Klibansky et Hildebrandus Bascour, O.S.B. Hamburgi.
4. Nicolaus Cusanus (1986), *Opera omnia* iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita. VIII *Cribratio Alkorani*, edidit commentariisque illustravit L. Hagemann, Hamburgi, p. 223, annotatio 77, ad n. 27,9–12.
5. *Doctrina Machumetis*, in *Machumetis Saracenorum principis, eiusque successorum vitae, ac doctrina ipseque Alcoran*, Haec omnia in unum uolumen redacta sunt, opera et studio Theodori Bibliandri (1550), Basileae, pp. 189-190.

the translation of this works, which he read on two different occasions for the writing of his works *De pace fidei* in 1453 and *Cribratio Alkorani* in 1461–62, he added his thoughts on the contents of this dialogue.

2. Nicholas of Cusa's Glosses⁶

We will focus, then, on the glosses “*Fides una, ritus diuersus*” (found in MS Kues 108, folio 25v, made in 1453 in preparation for writing *De pace fidei*) and “*Vna lex et fides, ritus uarius*” (found in MS Vat. lat. 4071, folio 17r, made between 1461 and 1462 in preparation for writing the *Cribratio Alkorani*).

These glosses are unequivocal proof of the source of this formula, which is accepted by scholars today who study his readings in MS Kues 108, and which we can now corroborate through the gloss written in the manuscript from the BAV.

It is true that Cusanus may have read the words in the eighth chapter of Riccoldo's *Contra legem Sarracenorum*,⁷ where the idea of the unity of all religion and the diversity of the rites that men establish among themselves is put in the mouth of Muḥammad: *Contra legem Sarracenorum* VIII 98: “*Preterea Mahometus in lege predicta dicit quod omnes homines erant unum et una secta et unus ritus, sed Deus diuersificauit eos mittendo diuersos prophetas.*”

It has also been remarked that Nicholas of Cusa was familiar with Ramon Llull's work in general and the *Liber de gentili et tribus sapientibus* in particular.⁸ Llull's observations in the prologue of this work underscore the desire to unify all men “in una lege et in una fide omnes qui uiuimus in hoc mundo.” Thus, all are united as a single people, walking together on the path to eternal salvation, giving God all glory and praise:

Remanserunt autem hi tres sapientes iuxta fontem sub illis quinque arboribus, quorum dixit unus: Quam magnum bonum foret istud, si per scientiam istarum Arborum possemus esse in una lege et in una fide omnes qui uiuimus in hoc mundo, ita quod ran-

6. Biechler, James E. (1983), «Three Manuscripts on Islam from the Library of Nicholas of Cusa», in *Manuscripta* 27, pp. 91–100, p. 91; Martínez Gázquez, José (2015), «A New Set of Glosses to the Latin Qur'an Made by Nicholas of Cusa (MS Vat. Lat. 4071)», in *Medieval Encounters* 21, pp. 295–309; *Idem*, (2016), «Las glosas de Nicolás de Cusa al Alchoranus Latinus en el ms. Vat. lat. 4071. Nuevos datos para la *Cribratio Alkorani*» in *Niccolò Cusano L'uomo, I Libri, L'opera*. Atti del LII Convegno storico internazionale Todi, 11-14 ottobre 2015. Centro Italiano di Studi sul Basso Medioevo - Accademia Tudertina, Spoleto, pp. 473–91.
7. Riccoldo da Monte di Croce, *Contra legem sarracenorum*, edited in Jean-Marie Mérigoux (1986), «L'ouvrage d'un frère precheur florentin en Orient à la fin du XIII^e siècle. 'Le *Contra legem Sarracenorum*' de Riccoldo da Monte di Croce», in *Fede e Controversia nel '300 e '500 (Memorie Domenicane*, Nuova Serie 17). Pistoia, pp. 1-144 (pp. 60–142).
8. De la Cruz Palma, Óscar (2015), *Liber de gentili et tribus sapientibus*, Prologus, ll. 231–48, in *Raimundi Lulli Opera Latina. 10-11, Liber contra Antichristum*, ed. Pamela-M. Beattie and *Liber de gentili et tribus sapientibus*, ed. Óscar de la Cruz Palma. CCCM 264 - ROL XXXVI, Brepols, Turnhout.

cor et odium non essent inter homines, qui se ad inuicem odiunt propter diuersas fides et contrarias leges diuersorum populorum, et quod, sicut est tantum unus Deus Pater et Dominus et Creator omnium rerum, ita omnes populi qui sunt positi sub diuersitate conuenirent esse unus populus, et quod ille esset in uia saluationis perpetuae; et sic quod omnes haberemus unam fidem et legem per quam possemus reddere gloriam et debitas laudes nostro Domino Deo creatori omnium bonorum. Considerate, domini, dixit sapiens suis sociis, quot sunt damna quae sequuntur, eo quod omnes homines non habent tantum unam fidem, quot etiam bona, quae forent, si omnes eandem legem concordanter teneremus. Cum igitur hoc sit uerum, si uideretur nobis esse bonum, quod sederemus sub istis arboribus iuxta fontem istum et disputaremus hoc quod quilibet nostrum credit. (Prologus, ll. 231–48).

3. “*Fides una, ritus diuersus*” in the work *De pace fidei* (1453).

Pin Valkenberg recently analyzed Nicholas of Cusa’s thinking about the variety of religions—“*Vna religio in rituum varietate*” (one religion in the diversity of rites)—in great detail and with great clarity. He focused his study directly “on the possible origins of just five words” and thus analyzed the historical sources of these words in the Qur’ān and their interpretation by Muslim scholars.⁹ Joshua Hollmann, in turn, has tried to identify their roots in the Greeks and the early Christian councils.¹⁰

Nicholas of Cusa broadly develops this key idea of the singularity of faith and equates the concept of faith to that of religion and the plurality of rites in which religion is manifested among men. And, thus, in *De pace fidei* he repeatedly highlights the grounds for his proposition that there is unity and concord among men. Throughout this treatise, he attempts to explain the idea that “all will know that there is only one religion in the diversity of rites.” Moreover, he seeks to establish that this knowledge should be a goal for which all must strive, not only Christians, among whom there was awareness of this idea going back to the Middle Ages, but also all other religions. This is how Nicholas of Cusa understands the fragment from the *Doctrina Mahumeti* that he glossed on two different occasions.

Walter Andreas Euler¹¹ points out that the phrase “*Vna religio in rituum varietate*,” which has religious, philosophical, and theological implications, encapsulates

9. Valkenberg, Pim (2014), «*Una Religio in Rituum Varietate*: Religious Pluralism, the Qur’an, and Nicholas of Cusa», in *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam. Polemic and Dialogue in the Late Middle Ages*, edited by Ian Christopher Levy Rita George-Tvrtković Donald F. Duclow, Brill Leiden-Boston, pp. 30–48; George-Tvrtković, Rita (2018), *Christian, Muslims, and Mary. A History*, Paulist Press New York-Mahwah, Chapter 4: Nicholas of Cusa, pp. 64–70.

10. Hollmann, Joshua (2014), «Reading *De pace fidei* Christologically: Nicholas of Cusa’s Verbum Dialectic of Religious Concordance», in *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic and Dialogue in the Late Middle Ages*, edited by Ian Christopher Levy, Rita George-Tvrtković, and Donald F. Duclow, Leiden, pp. 68–85 (pp. 83–84).

11. Euler, Walter Andreas (1995), «*Una religio in rituum varietate*. Der Beitrag des Nilolaus von Kues zur Religionen», in *Jahrbuch für Religionswissenschaft und Theologie der Religionen*, pp. 62–82.

the contents of the work *De pace fidei*. With Cusa's proposal in that work, a lasting peace between the religions is assured, if their followers will recognize that all religions are based on a strong intuition of God, which can be expressed in different rituals and customs. This is what he means by the phrase "one religion in the diversity of rites," as the objective that knowledge must strive toward: "*et cognoscent omnes quomodo non est nisi religio una in rituum varietate*".

De pace fidei I 6: Si sic facere dignaberis, cessabit gladius et odii livor, et quaeque mala; et cognoscent omnes quomodo non est nisi religio una in rituum varietate. Quod si forte haec differentia rituum tolli non poterit aut non expedit, ut diversitas sit devotionis adauctio, quando quaelibet regio suis cerimoniis quasi tibi regi gratioribus vigilantiolem operam impendet: saltem ut sicut tu unus es, una sit religio et unus latriae cultus.

We admit that, in the last analysis, we do not know God, and that we only know how he is worshipped in a variety of rites. He also reiterates this thinking, which is very present in the Qur'ān, in the treatise *Cribratio Alkorani*, where he stresses that God would not put obstacles in the way of the manifestation of different rites among different peoples while maintaining the unity of a single god.

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 reaffirms Nicholas of Cusa's and John of Segovia's conviction—which they had written about to each other in their correspondence—of the need to find a new, peaceful way to deal with the Muslims, that war and mutual violence would not help to solve the conflict between the two.

Thus, in *De pace fidei* III 8, in the dialogue between God and the various representatives of the different peoples and their respective religions, a dialogue which is mediated by the apostles Peter and Paul, Nicholas of Cusa emphasizes that, since God wanted "for man to be free, for nothing in the world of the senses to be stable, and for languages and conjectures to change over time, just like languages and interpretations, human nature needs more regular visits, for the many errors regarding your Word to disappear and for the truth to shine unceasingly. Since the truth is one and cannot fail to be comprehended by any free understanding, it will lead all the variety of religions to a single, orthodox faith," which will be accepted by all in harmony and will remain forever as a manifestation of a single, inviolable faith for each.

It is worthwhile, therefore, to seek spheres of belief and encounters that help to unite and not separate, and with this objective Nicholas of Cusa insists on thinking about a reality that seems to him to unify everyone. This idea is highlighted in *De pace fidei*, where Cusanus offers several different formulations of the idea, which, taken together, propose a peaceful relationship. He bases this on the analysis of the idea that in all the world's religions, and especially among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, there is a single, common foundation which is the belief in a single God, the God presented in the religions of the Book, but there are different ways of practicing religion, of relating to that God, as the various rites followed by the different believers make clear.

Nicholas of Cusa writes knowing that only God can bring about the reality of harmonious peace between peoples from the diverse manifestations of their cults and only God can help to unify the faith of all. But he also stresses that all men can and must reach a knowledge of the truth, according to each's intelligence and free from prejudices:

De pace fidei III 8: Et sic veritas continue elucescat. Quae cum sit una, et non possit non capi per omnem liberum intellectum, perducetur omnis religionum diversitas in unam fidem orthodoxam.

De pace fidei VI 16: VERBUM: Omnes ergo homines profitentur vobiscum unam absolutam sapientiam esse quam praesupponunt; quae est unus Deus.

ARABS: Sic est, et aliud nemo intelligens astruere potest.

VERBUM: Una est igitur religio et cultus omnium intellectu vigentium, quae in omni diversitate rituum praesupponitur.

4. “*Vna lex et fides, ritus uarius*” in the *Cribratio Alkorani*

Nicholas of Cusa also includes in the *Cribratio Alkorani* several allusions to this dilemma from Qur'ānic texts:

Alkoranus 42, 8: Omnis enim gens una fierent, si Deus ipse uellet, qui pro uelle suo misericordiam facit his.

Glossa MS Vat. lat. 4071, folio 105v to 42, 8: Omnes gentes una fierent si Deus ipse uellet.

Cribratio Alkorani I II 27: Quare concludunt, quod, si varietas legum vel rituum in identitate fidei in variis gentibus per dei nuntios praecepta reperiatur, hoc quidem oboedienti nequaquam, quominus apud piissimum atque iustissimum iudicem condignum praemium assequatur, obesse poterit. Enumerat autem prophetas et dei nuntios, quibus credendum erat: Abraham, Ismaelem, Isaac, Iacob, Moysen, Christum et alios plures. Haec est summa continentiae Alkorani secundum libri illius laudatores.

The idea of God's power to unify the religions and the forms of worship of all people, which is repeated several times in the Qur'ān (42: 8; 10: 99, 16: 93, etc.), is given consideration in the *Cribratio Alkorani* and is reaffirmed with the listing of all the different prophets sent by God to all corners of the world, for men to believe and obey:

Alkoranus 2 135: Tu ergo fidem creatoris illis predica, penitus persuadens.

Alkoranus 2 136: [...] ut libris tibi diuinitus missis, Abraheque et Hismaeli et Isaac atque Iacob, et tribubus legibusque Moysis et Christi, ceterorumque prophetarum nullis per te segregatis firmam fidem adhibeant, creatorem adorantes.

Cribratio Alkorani III XVI 218: Deus enim, ut Alkoranus dicit, dedit cuilibet genti, quod sua sunt ei placida; ideo hoc occultum spectat ad iudicem occultorum extremi iudicii. Ostendite, ubi hoc Abraham aut fecerit vel fieri praeceperit! Et quia non reperietis, male dicitis vos Abrahae legem sequi. Quotiens dicit liber vester: Si deus vellet. omnes eiusdem legis et ritus essent, sed sic, uti videmus, permittit.

Ultimately, Nicholas of Cusa bases the formulation of his glosses “*Fides una, ritus diuersus*” and “*Vna lex et fides, ritus uarius*” on the words of the Prophet, “*Lex quidem, siue fides, omnium una, sed ritus diuersorum nimirum diuersi,*” in the *Doctrina Mahumeti*, following the exact words that were used by Muḥammad in his response to the Jew Abdia iben Salon. Thus, he interprets *lex* as *fides*, which is embodied in the variety of forms of worship—*ritus, cultus*—with which all nations can honor God.